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ABSTRACT

For an instructor of freshman composition at the University of Michigan at Flint, faith-based writing topics offer particular challenges and sometimes intersect in troubling ways with her own prejudices and personal history as a teacher and as a person. But if handled correctly, she believes that a teacher's interaction with students about religious topics can be a mutually enlightening experience and a powerful teaching tool. The instructor first discusses her own background and then offers some maxims about reacting to students' interests in religious topics. First, she recommends the use of a "clear-eyed textbook" to which a teacher can turn when feeling the need for another credible voice and a process. Second, she advocates using the same questioning process for religious topics that she would use for any other topics. Third, she finds there is a need to clarify the nature of evidence and how acceptable and credible evidence differs from one discourse community to another. A fourth maxim is: audience, audience, audience: she suggests that students visualize a reader who disagrees with them or comes from a different tradition. Fifth, the instructor increasingly attempts to refrain from punishing students for exploring religious topics. Sixth, she emphasizes that the skills taught in university writing courses are different from those taught in religious settings, and that the two skill sets are not mutually exclusive. Two sets of e-mails between the instructor and two young students who want to write about religious topics illustrate the process she uses with students. (NKA)

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Hot-spots and Holiness:

Faith-Based Topics in Freshman Composition

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J. M. Worth

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

It's Wednesday afternoon of student conference week, and on my office door I've taped the schedule – 20-minute meetings with each of my 75 second-semester freshman composition students. It takes the whole five days. I've cancelled classes, and students get dunned two absences if they don't show up. After each one leaves I stand up, stretch, and triumphantly cross out another name on the door.

And then the fifty-third student walks in. He's tall and, in class, very quiet, though he's there every day, on time, ready to go. He's a simplistic, even childish writer, and all but one paper he's written so far is about country western music – specifically Shania Twain, toward whom I gather he directs most of his out-of-class attention. The paper he didn't write about Shania Twain recounted a church hayride, and it ended with an awkward but heartfelt call for the reader to accept Jesus Christ as her personal savior.

The new paper we're discussing is to be an argument. He says he wants to write on prayer in the schools. I say that could be a fine topic, and inquire about his sources.

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He pulls out a notepad with his church logo on the top. The handwriting isn't his own. On it are six or seven Bible verses.

"I'm using the Bible," he says, "And I'm going to interview my pastor."

I don't think I've hidden my weary, inward sigh.

"Are you *for* school prayer?" I begin, mildly ashamed of myself for this faux innocence.

"Absolutely," he says.

"And I take it you're for school prayer for all religious groups – Jewish, say, or Buddhist?"

He looks at me as if I'm pitiable.

"We don't have any of those at my high school," he says, dumbfounded that I would introduce this irrelevant point.

The next student, a young white woman, is one of my favorites, perhaps because she treats me with deference and laughs at all my in-class jokes. We've had several one-to-one conversations, and I discover that like *my* father, her father is a minister. But hers entered the clergy after years as a blue-collar worker; he went back to seminary, at considerable cost to himself and his family, and he's now in his first parish. She is very proud of him – she adores him. Her father has moved up in the world – making a rare leap from the hard-bitten second shift, grease-stained monotony of making cars to a life of the spirit.

She's very well organized and polite. I've asked the students to frame their thesis statements in terms of what someone should or ought to do, along lines that can be demonstrated with evidence. She has her outline and a clear thesis statement: "People

should pray more often, because prayer can change our lives." From her backpack with an appliqued kitten on it, she pulls out a book which she says she will use as a major source: it's a religious bestseller about miracles accomplished through prayer, written by a Christian televangelist. I take a deep breath and pull out the class text, Everything's An Argument, and prepare for a long, but respectful, conversation.

Finally, several appointments later, an older student, a woman, walks in with the usual chip on her shoulder. All her papers so far have been about divorce, and she's conveyed that she's going through a horrid breakup that has her in the clutches of vivid anger and resentment. She has moved in with her grandmother, an ardent Catholic, and is returning to religion. She doesn't appreciate several things about me: that I kept my own name when I married, that I advocate "his or her" instead of "his," that I've been known to declare myself a feminist.

Her paper is an argument against abortion. Like her earlier colleague, almost all her sources are from the Bible. She also includes lengthy extracts from papal decrees, quotes from her parish priest, and an interview with her grandmother. Again, as with the earlier student, I am nettled by my own personal history and opinions, lurking dangerously, as I attempt to take her through each step of the process.

Certainly our writing students struggle with questions of logic and audience no matter what their topics. But it seems to me that faith-based topics offer particular challenges, and, in my experience, sometimes intersect in troubling ways with my own prejudices and personal history as a teacher and as a person.

I'm the daughter of a Midwestern Protestant fundamentalist minister. When I was our students' age, I rebelled. I moved to California, dissociated myself with organized religion, and for years couldn't resist provoking and picking on my family.

Eventually, I started going home again. In 1979 I came back to the Midwest to go to graduate school, and I've never left. But I never again joined a church, and I ran from fanaticism like hell.

As a young adult, I cleaved to the comforts of neutrality: I became a newspaper reporter committed to assembling just the facts. Then I became a social worker, a profession devoted to the rights and potential of the individual – to self-determination. And then, after getting another degree and gradually claiming my destiny as a writer, I became a teacher.

Here is some of what I have learned. To be teachers, we must be optimists, believing that our students can learn. In teaching, we must respect our students – both the complicated personal histories and experiences with which they come to us, and the difficulties that, in many cases, their present lives entail. We believe in change, and we have to become experts in how to broker that change. It takes patience and fortitude, and, sometimes, conscious self-restraint.

And one part of that self-restraint comes in recognizing our hot spots and developing skills for maneuvering around and through them. For me, religious topics are clearly incendiary. Priscilla Perkins' comments in her 2001 College English essay " 'A Radical Conversion of the Mind': Fundamentalism, Hermeneutics and the Metanoic Classroom" could have been written about me: "Teachers respond negatively," she notes, "To students who do not tolerate viewpoints or modes of living different from their

own, and they do not know how to teach critical thinking and argumentation to students whose approach to textual authority runs so counter to mainstream cultural literacies." She suggests that this is not an irrational reaction, but "a simultaneously political and intellectual distrust with tangible causes." Still, she adds, "Teachers write off evangelical students much too quickly."

Some factors complicating the discussion:

- In public universities, such as the one where I work, The University of Michigan – Flint, obviously the commitment is to diversity and openness to others' points of view. Our programs have been designed, UM – Flint's catalog pluckily declares, "So that students can develop the knowledge, intellectual skills, values and attitudes which will help them make thoughtful and informed judgments about their experiences." Further, the catalog later states, "Students are free to take exception to the data or views presented and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion." ( ). There's that word judgment, twice – a word implying evaluation, putatively the highest cognitive skill asserted by Benjamin Bloom's old taxonomy, knowing the difference between right and wrong. In some hands, this is an explicitly religious concept.
- Yet, I'm afraid of letting my own biases show. I confess: since UM-Flint is a commuter campus and most of our students go home to their parents at night, I'm uncomfortably paranoid about students' parents' accusations – that the university represents evil liberalism.

- Yet, as a teacher and humanist I believe in people's rights to say and think whatever they want. When religious topics emerge, I tend to fall into an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance – I don't want to deal with them; I begin to re-know all my own stereotypes about religious people, especially my own: Protestant fundamentalists. This discomfort is not without precedent; in a recent New York Times article about Garrison Keillor's remarkable success poking fun at Baptists, Lutherans and Unitarians, Ray Waddle aptly captured my cringe. He called Keillor's jokes, "a trespass on the guarded compound of public rhetoric." Waddle continued, "It's the unwritten etiquette of church-state separation, a tradition of reluctance to talk about religion, other people's religion, on the air" (Waddle) And, I add, in the classroom of a public university.
- Yet, I believe that students learn about themselves by writing about themselves, which is why within some parameters I let them select their own topics. I believe they write better if they write about something that interests them. So I don't believe I have the right to punish them for their selections, after inviting them to make their own choices.
- The traditions of academic writing differ from religious writing, differentiated not only by rhetorical and evidentiary protocols but also by the sense of audience and the writer's relationship and obligations to that audience.
- The students' frequent sloppy logic and religious jingoism offends me and triggers my own anger. I confuse my students with the fanatics I disdained as a youth.

- Many of our students use religious topics to avoid thinking. They hand packaged beliefs to us that are cliched, directly lifted from everything they've ever been told, recited by rote from parents and pastors.

But handled correctly, it's my belief that our interaction with students about religious topics can be mutually enlightening experience and a powerful teaching tool. How should we react to students' interests in religious topics? How can we calm down in that panicky encounter and transform it into a "teaching moment"?

I have some ideas.

First, I recommend the use of a clear-eyed textbook to which a teacher can turn when feeling the need for another credible voice, a scapegoat if you will. and a process. As mentioned before, I am quite taken with Andrea Lunsford and John Ruskiewicz's Everything's An Argument (Bedford St. Martin's, 2001), which is short, brisk, lucid, relevant and, in my view, refreshingly clear of dogmatism.

Lunsford and Ruskiewicz's presentation of the four-part formulation of a claim, reason, warrant and evidence has proven of immense help in my in-office conversations with students. As they explain it in a chapter on writing proposals, "The reason sets up the need for the proposal, whereas the warrant and evidence demonstrate that the proposal could indeed meet its objective" (Lunsford 194). The idea of the warrant, the underlying assumptions of a claim, is especially useful in helping students think clearly about their beliefs, identifying their own assumptions about their claims – assumptions which may not be provable or, more to the point, shared by their readers.

Second, I use the same questioning process for religious topics that we'd use for any other topics: Why does this topic interest you? What is at stake for you in writing about this topic? Why should a reader care? Whom do you imagine as your reader? How do you want him or her to react? What is your claim? What is your evidence?

Third, then, is the need to clarify the nature of evidence and how acceptable and credible evidence differs from one discourse community to another. I've often said things like, "This paper assignment is not an occasion for faith-based arguments. There's another arena where you could use faith-based arguments – your church or synagogue. Here, we're concentrating on giving you practice in developing logical arguments that can be demonstrated even to people who differ from you philosophically, religiously, culturally."

This leads to my fourth maxim: audience, audience, audience: I suggest that students visualize a reader who disagrees with them, comes from a different religious, cultural or philosophical tradition. In a definition on "What is a Christian?" a very bright student used phrases like "In my religious tradition," or "In the scriptural background most Christians rely upon," to good effect in keeping her topic responsibly open to other perspectives. On this topic, I've often said things like, "It's easy to convince somebody to agree with you if they already share most of your views and assumptions. The trick is in figuring out how to convince somebody who DISAGREES with you. That requires real skill."

Fifth, I increasingly attempt to refrain from punishing students for exploring religious topics. At heart, I do not want them to leave my office feeling bad about their faith or about their interest in exploring it. I remember my own pleasure in Bible studies

as a kid: I loved to talk about what things meant. And I highly value the practice of close reading and earthy application that my childhood taught me. While admittedly usually applied to other texts – some even racily pagan! – and to other contexts, I use those skills every day. I've taken pains to tell students that there is a long and esteemed history of religious writing, and that they may want to explore some of those great writers such as St. Augustine or Thomas Merton. When I first presented this paper at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago, a listener suggested even "Why I Am Not a Christian" by Bertrand Russell. At least this would drive home the truth that writing about religion has a history: it happens, sometimes with brilliance and panache.

Sixth, I emphasize that the skills taught in university writing courses are different from those taught in religious settings, and that the two skill sets are not mutually exclusive: a writer discriminates when to use which one just as in the way one talks differently to one's grandmother than to one's boyfriend. In fact, I've praised the merits of a wide repertoire and suggested that well-developed skills in one repertoire can sometimes enhance skills in other repertoires. In this way, I'm reframing an interest in religious matters as sophisticated, assuming the students take their explorations seriously.

To illustrate the process I engage in with my students, especially in the topic-selection phase, here are two sets of emails between me and two young students who wanted to write about religious topics. I am not entirely satisfied with these exchanges, but offer them without editing to pinpoint the challenge at hand. It often feels like wrestling. These were both submitted during preparation for writing a cause-and-effect

paper, the third of five research-based papers in the second-semester of freshman composition.

1. **The Resurrection of Christ...or Tanning.**

From: X

Sent: Sat 3/2/2002 1:04 a.m.

To: Worth, Jan

Subject: Hello

Jan,

Well, I am writing my topics to you for the next paper. The first is my preference and that is the cause of the Resurrection of Christ, and the effect on the now bold apostles. The second is to do the tanning and the possible effects. While I know this has more sources, the first one has more of my heart in it. This was the email you asked for.

From: Worth, Jan

Sent: Saturday, 3/02/2002 1:04 p.m.

To: X

Subject: Re: Hello

Hi, X. I hope your spring break is going well. Thanks for contacting me with your proposed topics.

For this exercise, I want you to avoid the faith-based argument because the point of this paper is to practice your use of logic and evidence. As you know, while it's an incredibly important part of life, belief is not always provable through logical. Still, our logical minds are part of our makeup, and my job is to get you to develop some of those

capabilities. I know you'll continue to develop your faith on your own; give me six more weeks of logic.

I would be happy with the tanning topic or any other similar one that allows you to examine sense-based and empirical evidence. If you decide against the effects of tanning, let me know so I can add my two cents to your new ideas.

Take care, and I'll see you Monday, assuming no weather interferes with my return flight.

[The student settled on tanning, did a decent job on the paper and got an "A." It was competent and clear. But I found myself asking, "Have I really furthered his intellectual development – enriched his life of the mind?"]

2. **The Causes and Effects of Salvation…Or My Inguinal Hernia.** [This student had had me for first-semester freshman composition, in which he had received an "A" for a much-revised narrative piece on the day he was "born again." He handled the account gracefully and in line with the assignment, which was to be based on personal memory and sensory details. But he had trouble making the jump to the second semester class, which focused on research writing. The student and I had talked frequently about religion and religious topics, and no matter how often I stated my position, when the next paper assignment came out I would have to state it again.]

From: Y

Sent: Tue 3/5/2002 12:42 a.m.

To: Worth, Jan

Subject: ??

Jan,

I'm working on my cause & effect paper, and I think maybe you wanted us to check with you to make sure our topic's are valid. I'm planning on writing about Jesus Christ. My cause will be the need for people to receive salvation to enter into Heaven. I will use Old Testament verses and teaching to examine the world before God sent Jesus to Earth. Hence, Jesus' arrival will be the effect. Let me know if this will be sufficient. Don't worry, I have other sources than just the Bible. Thanks.

From: Worth, Jan

Sent: Tuesday, 3/05/2002, 8:27 a.m.

To: Y

Re: ??

X, you're putting me in an awkward position here, in which I have to remind you that you're confusing the purpose of this class and its goals. As I've attempted to convey in previous conversations, this is not a faith-based class, nor a faith-based setting, and your audience is not a faith-based audience. While as you know I have a hearty respect for the importance of your belief, this class is a place to practice logical skills. I trust that you'll develop your beliefs on your own; give me six more weeks to teach you about logic and empirical evidence. This said, the topic above will not work for our class.

It's possible that you could use the topic of why people are attracted to the idea of 'salvation,' perhaps, but I would require you to make some different assumptions about the audience and to use objective, non-proselytizing sources who stand outside the

process of religious ecstasy and examine it empirically. See the problem? Faith, in the way I think you want to parse it, does not lend itself to empirical study. That's okay, of course. But that's why your topic doesn't work in the way you want it to for this class. As I've said before, it's like trying to play hockey in a swimming pool. Or like presenting a poem for a math exam.

I find this discussion uncomfortable, but I'll stick to my position. Please understand, Y, that I respect your convictions greatly, but my class is not the place to preach them.

From: Y

Sent: Tue 3/5/2002 10:51 a.m.

To: Worth, Jan

Subject: Re: ?

Jan,

I understand completely. Don't feel uncomfortable with the discussion, because I will not be hurt in any way, nor were my intentions desired to hurt you or our class mates. Here is my plan B...over the break, I was diagnosed with a right inguinal hernia. I would like to examine the muscles damanges when receiving a hernia and the symptoms that arise. Also, for the cause part, I will discuss the exercises and the ways that such a problem can occur. I again apoligize for the inconvenience. I consider myself an open-minded person except for when it comes to my religion. I understand that everyone doesn't feel the same way and I will take this into consideration in the future. Thank you.

From: Worth, Jan

Sent: Tues 3/5/2002 12:02 p.m.

To: Y

Subject: Re:??

Hi, Y. I am satisfied with this topic and with your Plan B, though I'm sorry you have to deal with it. At least you'll get a paper out of it – some good can result, then, eh? Thanks for your response.

[Again, I found myself asking, "Have I really further this essentially well-intentioned student's intellectual life?" And I was struck by the endearing civility of his reply.]

To come back to our three examples at the beginning, the young Shania Twain fan changed his topic completely. The young woman who wanted to write about prayer, reframed her research questions and examined studies that have been done on meditation and its effects on physiology, and got a well-deserved "A." The older student who wanted to write on abortion did so; she grudgingly continued researching sources of opinion about her topic and added several I considered reputable and credible. In return, I allowed her to retain her priest as a source.

This is not trivial. The events of September 11 have loudly alerted us to wake up to why these issues matter. I am thinking in particular of Andrew Sullivan's memorable New York Times piece a month after the attacks, in which he wrote, "The first mistake is surely to condescend to fundamentalism. We may disagree with it, but it has attracted millions of adherents for centuries, and for a good reason. It elevates and comforts. It provides a sense of meaning and direction to those lost in a disorienting world." Commenting that even the violent acts that by religious fundamentalists have "an internal

logic," he provocatively adds, "It is not crazy to act this way if you believe these things strongly enough. In some ways, it's crazier to believe these things and not act this way."

These are not times to run from the emergence of religious topics in freshman writing, but to embrace more than ever the necessity of allowing our students to grapple with the topics that concern them, the topics they care about. It is a way of getting them to care about their lives, to critically examine their beliefs and how they put these beliefs into practice.

While we should justly resist turning our classes into revival meetings, a considered, respectful and curious response to faith-based topics can benefit our students, enrich our classrooms, edify our teaching, and in a way that now seems more important than ever, keep the academy's doors open to the exploration of truth.

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